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ABSTRACT

This document is a review of the literature on educational accountability and the presentation of a model of accountability developed by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). Current literature is reviewed in terms of definitions, relationships to past educational reform movements, and critical issues that impact on current accountability efforts such as politics, standards, assessment, inclusion, cost, data, governance, and leadership. Aspects of accountability systems in specific states and other countries are used to illustrate some of the issues. The review of the literature indicates that there is much unfinished business in the educational reform movement, and there are gaps in the research that need to be filled to assist in guiding that movement. The importance of a comprehensive model to address the concept of accountability is discussed, followed by the description of the development of the NASDSE accountability model. The model depicts educational accountability as comprised of the following three components: accountability for inputs and processes, accountability for system standards, and accountability for individual student learning. It defines an accountable education system as one which ensures that all children, including those with disabilities, benefit from their educational experience through equal access, high standards, and high expectations. (Contains 104 references.) (CR)

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Educational Accountability: A Synthesis of the Literature and Review of a Balanced Model of Accountability

by

Eileen M. Ahearn, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This document is a review of the literature on educational accountability and the presentation of a model of accountability developed by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). It was developed as an activity of Project FORUM and the initial draft was used as a background paper for a Wingspread Conference on the NASDSE model. Current literature is reviewed in terms of definitions, relationship to past educational reform movements, and critical issues that impact on current accountability efforts such as politics, standards, assessment, inclusion, cost, data, governance, and leadership. Aspects of accountability systems in specific states and other countries are used to illustrate some of the issues. Finally, the importance of a comprehensive model to address the concept of accountability is discussed, followed by a description of the development of the NASDSE accountability model, its meaning and potential for use.

Educational Accountability: A Synthesis of the Literature and a Review of a Balanced Model of Accountability

INTRODUCTION

This document is a synthesis of recent literature on educational accountability and a review of the Balanced Model of Accountability developed by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). First, the methodology used for this synthesis is discussed. Then, the treatment of accountability in current literature is reviewed in terms of definitions, relationship to past reform movements, and critical issues that impact on current accountability efforts such as politics, standards, assessment, inclusion, cost, data, governance, and leadership. Aspects of accountability systems in specific states and other countries are used to illustrate some of the issues. Finally, the importance of a comprehensive model to address the concept of accountability is discussed, followed by a description of the development of the NASDSE accountability model, its meaning and potential for use.

A previous draft of this paper was used as the background document for a Wingspread Conference convened in October 1999 as the final in a series of developmental meetings on the NASDSE Model.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The most frequently cited defining element of the current educational reform movement is accountability. The purpose of this review of the literature is to examine the most current information related to the component elements that are included in discussions of educational accountability, and to inform deliberations on the further development and refinement of a comprehensive model of accountability.

A multi-faceted approach was used to identify relevant materials for this synthesis. Traditional search strategies were followed for acquiring references within published materials such as professional books and journals, and the popular press. In addition, other sources were pursued for relevant materials including the internet, government agency publications, and other producers of fugitive literature such as educational associations and related organizations.

Although the term accountability has been used for a long time in relation to public education, the majority of available resources are focused on one or a few elements, and there is only limited treatment of accountability from a systemic perspective. The attached bibliography includes all materials directly referenced in the text, as well as additional citations that provide further clarification of the complex concepts related to educational accountability discussed in this document.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION

Past Reform Efforts

The current accountability emphasis in American education is an outgrowth of a succession of reform movements in American education in this century that has been documented by a number of writers (Bunting, 1999; Resnick & Hall, 1998; Slavin, 1997). The modern phase of reform can be dated from Russia's launch of Sputnik, the first successful man-made space orbiting satellite in 1957. A major reaction to this event in the United States was criticism of American schools for failures in teaching mathematics and science, followed by an increased emphasis on academic skills. However, the effects of this reform were short-lived with the coming of the civil rights movement and an increased focus on the well-being of individual students. Then, after a few years, a swing back in the direction of academics began, fueled by declining scores on college entrance examinations (SAT/ACT), and the growing interest in international comparisons that showed American students moving further and further from the top of the list. As Bunting(1999) observes, each new cure became the root of a new problem.

In 1981, the Secretary of Education formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education to "examine the quality of education in the United States" as a result of his concern about "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system." The release of the Commission's report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, in April 1983 marks the start of the current educational reform movement (National Commission, 1983). Even after 15 years, the reform activated by this report persists, having lived through a series of iterations commonly referred to as "waves" (Smith & O'Day, 1991). The "first wave," in the early 1980s, concentrated top-down mandates for change in areas such as course taking and graduation requirements; the "second wave" moved to a more bottoms-up emphasis focusing on decentralization, most prominently seen in the movement toward school-based management; and, the "third wave" is the foundation of the current standards-based movement (Louis, 1998). As Resnick and Hall (1998, p. 89) observe, "The most striking feature of the education reform movement in America today is that it is still with us." They attribute the persistence of the movement to awareness among Americans that the economy in the information age requires more and better education. On this same point, Louis (1998) notes that the reform movement set in motion by the report shows little sign of abating, having changed the nature of schooling from a local issue to a focus on state and national policy.

Currently, education reform can be described as having two diverse thrusts—systemic and school-level. Systemic approaches, characterized by the adoption of standards and assessments, continue to develop in every state with local expansion of these elements in many districts. However, questions have been raised about the efficacy of reform from this level. As Goertz, Flodden and O'Day (1996) observe, reformers have come to realize that more challenging standards and assessments alone are not enough to raise student achievement. At the same time, school-by-school approaches have also been criticized for their limitations, such as the negative influence of political tensions and faculty opposition. (Muncey & McQuillan, 1993). Smith and O'Day (1991) cite other factors that mitigate against successful change using a school-by-school approach such as the

difficulty in generalizing success because of the lack of coherence in our educational system. They describe the state as "a critical actor" (p. 5), and conclude that combining systemic state-initiated reform and school-based restructuring has a far greater chance of success than either type of reform carried out independently.

Slavin (1997, p. 9) also recommends a combined approach, noting that more successful outcomes can be achieved through a combination—state-mandated systemic reforms tied to an array of proven options for school-level and classroom reform. The U. S. Department of Education has also adopted strategies to support multiple levels of reform to improve student learning. In fiscal year 1998, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program was initiated to support the adoption of research-based, effective comprehensive school programs by providing financial incentives. The Department's program materials and initial reports of implementation emphasize the role of states in integrating school-level reform with their own standards-based efforts (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). In addition, many other sources of information about school-level reform, such as the Achieving Student Success internet site (www.reformhandbook-LSS.org), have been set up to describe school-wide restructuring models.

In the last decade, there have been growing public demands for improved student learning, and the hallmark of reform at this time is accountability. However, as the next section on definition of the term describes, the literature is replete with various meanings for this important concept.

Definition

Writers on the topic of educational reform use the term *accountability* in many different ways. Some create their own definition for the word, while others decry the lack of consistency in its use. Ouston (1998, p.111) notes that, although the term is widely used as if it were straightforward, it must be viewed as vague and incoherent. This view is shared by Kuchapski (1998) who notes that the pervasiveness of accountability as a method for reforming education suggests that a high degree of clarity surrounds the term, but this is not so. Kuchapski proposes a framework to put together the disparate pieces of the accountability puzzle, but the result is limited to a focus on the political aspect.

Newmann, King and Rigdon (1997) describe the historical concept of accountability as a relationship between a provider of a service and the agent who has the power to reward, punish or replace the provider. These writers select a definition that is an adaptation of that proposed by other writers: "accountability is a process by which school districts and states (or other constituents such as parents) attempt to ensure that schools and school systems meet their goals" (p. 42). They conclude that a complete school accountability system should include at least four parts: information about performance, standards for judging its success, significant consequences, and designation of an agent that does the judging and distribution of consequences. A similar definition is offered by the Education Commission of the States—a systemic collection, analysis and use of information to hold schools, educators and others responsible for student performance (Husain, 1998).

Frymier (1996) anchors accountability to the concept of evaluation using the following reasoning as the basis for his definition: to be accountable means to be responsible; assessing responsibility involves judging performance against a criterion; judging performance against a criterion means to evaluate; therefore, accountability requires evaluation. He concludes that, in most of its present forms, accountability is an instrument of control rather than a vehicle for improvement.

MacPherson (1998) stresses that definitions of accountability are based on values, political ideologies and epistemologies, and focuses on particularly difficult challenges for urban schools in terms of ethical, economic, and practical dilemmas in designing an accountability policy. Hill (1999) concludes that the problem is built into the basic arrangements cities use to run public education, such as new initiatives that are designed to address problems, but that only weaken schools by adding district-wide programs and mandates based on a "one-size fits all" belief. He maintains that system-wide initiatives seldom fit particular schools well. Other factors of equal importance, according to Hill, include the instability of urban system leadership, and "turf preservation" on the part of tenured and civil service protected employees. His solution is to re-define accountability by strengthening individual schools and restructuring the role of the district central office.

Despite all these and other efforts to define the term *accountability*, differences and confusions continue to appear and there is no precision in its use for education. Yet, accountability remains the rallying cry of the current educational reform movement. As Tacheny (1999, p. 62) concludes, "Accountability might be the most overused sound bite in education today." Accountability is taken up again later in this paper (page 13) in connection with the NASDSE model.

Characteristics of Current Accountability Efforts

In order to explain accountability more completely and expand the level of understanding on how the term is being used, this section provides a summary of the major aspects and components of the concept that appear in recent literature.

Politics and Ideology

Education has become a very high profile issue for politicians mainly in response to public demands for improvements in learning that continue to spark the reform movement. As Richard Elmore has stated, "Accountability for student performance is one of the two or three—if not the most—prominent issues in policy at the state and local levels right now" (Quality Counts, 1999, p. 8). In addition to this widely recognized public interest, the legislated base of current reforms, with the resultant extensive involvement of local, state and federal officials, raises the level of attention that must be paid to political and ideological diversity in the design and implementation of change.

One of the major concerns of educators is captured by Cibulka & Derlin (1998b, p. 502) in their statement, "In many states, before policies have adequate time to be tested, they are overturned or revised by a new governor, chief state school officer, state board, or legislature." Contrasting the

experiences in Maryland and Colorado in adopting performance accountability, these authors (1998a) describe the problems of interpretation and meaning at state and local levels. They recommend careful attention to three aspects of policy at both the adoption and implementation stages:

- institutional issues that require a compromise among key stakeholders;
- rational/technical issues that involve executive and managerial implications; and,
- interpretive issues, recognizing that the meaning attached to policy are inherently subjective and open to misinterpretation.

In analyzing articles that address the politics of accountability, MacPherson, Cibulka, Monk and Wong (1998) conclude that there is a need to recognize, to accept, and to respond proactively to the central role of politics in the administration and management of educational systems. Too often, non-productive reactions such as denial, selective attention, aggression, and even disregard of legitimate interests occur. These authors believe that, if accountability policies are to succeed, they must be "educative" in nature, that is, open to change as we learn from experience.

The case study reported by French (1998) examines the effects of changes in the state role that occurred as a result of political changes in the implementation of Massachusetts' reform legislation. The initial extensive involvement of teachers through an array of standards and assessment work groups was reversed by a shift in state board control that brought a strong conservative majority into power.

Other aspects of the political climate were addressed by McDonnell, McLaughlin and Morrison (1997). Noting that standards-based reform has mobilized diverse ideological interest groups such as the Eagle Forum and the People for the American Way, they caution that "to talk about the institutional arrangements assumed in the standards-based policy framework is to pose a question about who has authority to define and implement standards and to ask whether consensus is possible among all these different interests" (p. 32).

Standards and Assessments

The most common descriptor used for the current educational reform movement is "standards-based," clearly indicating the importance of standards as the fundamental component. There are, however, many controversial and complex issues involved in standards from initial drafting to final adoption. For example, Strike (1998) questions whether the pluralistic nature of our society can be reconciled with centralized goal formation. In reviewing the principles involved, he suggests thinking of multiculturalism as involving "a shared center with a diverse periphery" (p. 203). He recommends "thick but vague standards" that allow for a common core with specialized or local additions as the way to implement this principle, and he cites the New York State Standards as an example (p. 215).

There is also some continuing confusion about different kinds of standards, and a shared understanding of terminology is essential at all points in the development and use of standards. One essential clarification is the basic distinction between *content standards*—what a student should

know and be able to do—and *performance standards*—what level of performance is acceptable. Also, some expressions can be misleading, e.g., a standardized test is any examination that is administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner, but there may or may not be a direct connection between a standardized test and a particular set of standards.

At this time, all states except Iowa have adopted statewide standards, but the number and type of goals involved in state standards vary greatly. Some states, such as Colorado and Michigan, consider their standards to be only models, and allow local districts to adopt their own (Chun & Goertz, 1999). Then, there are local districts that have been involved in their own reform programs that impose another layer of requirements on individual schools in addition to state standards. Schmoker and Marzano (1999) describe the problems as "getting standards right." They observe that, because it is easier to enlarge than to reduce, we have examples of very large sets of standards that could not be realistically taught or assessed. These authors advise that the promise of reform will be realized only if standards are "clear, not confusing; essential, not exhaustive" (p. 21).

Who should make the decision about what is included in standards? This is another potentially divisive issue. In a recent survey, Public Agenda Online reported that American people think state and local governments should be primarily responsible for setting academic standards. The attitude that the federal government should not impose educational policy on state and local levels is also a strong component in the recent controversy over proposed Voluntary National Tests. Yet, as Tucker and Codding (1998) maintain, standards must be as universal as possible. They use the metaphor of telephone lines: a company that connects people only to telephones in their neighborhood is not worth much, but a company that can connect millions of lines throughout the country is worth a great deal more. They argue that a certificate that says one has met a standard that is honored everywhere in the United States is worth a lot more than a certificate honored only in one's community or state, especially in our highly mobile society.

According to many experts, the issues related to assessment are even more difficult. *Education Week*'s series of supplements on the reform movement (Quality Counts, 1999) notes that every state but Iowa will have at least one form of a statewide test by the year 2000. Murphy & Doyle (1998) caution that standards must be understood as instrumental and not ends in themselves, and that the more significant challenge is measuring performance against the standards and identifying consequences for failure. Strike (1998, p. 210) states that tests coerce more than standards, and he suggests that it is tests, not goals, that should be viewed as the real standards.

The problems involved in the selection and administration of statewide assessments to measure progress toward the achievement of standards are seemingly endless. Popham (1999, p.15) maintains that standardized tests do not measure educational quality, and he recommends that educators carry out a campaign to ensure that everyone concerned understands the shortcomings of this type of measurement. At the same time, newer forms of assessment that were introduced as more educationally relevant, such as performance events and portfolios, have also been widely criticized for use in connection with large scale measurement. Koretz (1998) discusses the reliability and validity of four examples of large scale assessments that use portfolios—Vermont, Kentucky, Pittsburgh, and the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). He concludes

that "Portfolio assessment has attributes that make it particularly appealing to those who wish to use the assessment to encourage richer instruction....But, some of these attributes may undermine the ability of the assessments to provide performance data of comparable meaning across large numbers of schools. One size may not fit all" (p. 334).

Another critical issue in relation to standards and assessment is their alignment with the curriculum. Research being conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (Goertz, Floden & O'Day, 1996) reports that reform is facilitated for states when there is coherence among the elements of state educational policy. Not only does this provide more consistent signals about what is important for teachers to teach and students to learn, but it also eliminates the need for teachers to divide their time between teaching a curriculum that stresses one kind of knowledge and skills, and preparing students for standardized tests that assess a different kind. The negative results due to a lack of alignment were described in a study of the school reform models known as NASDC (New American Schools Development Corporation) by Mitchell (1996).

Robert Linn (1999) captured the most critical issues in testing and standards in the suggestions he made for improving the validity, credibility and positive impact of assessment systems while minimizing their negative impact. He recommends that policymakers:

- Set standards that are high, but attainable.
- Develop standards, then assessments to closely measure those standards.
- Include all students in testing programs except those with the most severe disabilities, and use accommodated assessments for students who have not yet transitioned into English language programs or whose disabilities require it.
- Useful high-stakes accountability requires new high-quality assessments each year that are comparable to those of previous years.
- Don't put all of the weight on a single test when making important decisions about students and schools, (i.e., retention, promotion, rewards).
- Place more emphasis on comparisons of performance from year to year than from school to school.
- Set both long- and short-term goals for all schools to reach.
- Since all testing systems contain uncertainty, report on this aspect in all test results.
- Evaluate not only the positive effects of standards-based assessments, but also the unintended negative effects of the testing system.
- Narrowing the achievement gap means that we must provide all children with the teachers and resources they need in order to reach our high expectations. This means improving the educational system as a whole, and not just more or new testing systems.

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

One of the unintended consequences of federal and state laws that were designed to provide access to public education for students with disabilities has been the development of a separate identity for special education and its isolation from general education in many ways. The parallel system of special education that has emerged since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975 was not included in the early stages of the general education reform

movement. An entirely separate accountability process for special education as a system has evolved whereby federal and state departments of education monitor compliance with federal and state special education laws and regulations. Until recently, this monitoring process focused exclusively on procedural matters, but recent redesign has concentrated on areas of compliance that have the most impact on improving outcomes for students with disabilities (Office of Special Education Programs, 1999).

State accountability systems rhetorically commit to the achievement of standards by "all" students. It is only in implementing assessments to measure progress toward this goal that the extraordinary difficulties involved in meeting this ideal begin to surface. As stated in the National Academy of Sciences report, "The broad range of people involved in the educational enterprise need to understand and to agree on what the phrase 'all students can learn to high standards' really means. Survey data from teachers and the public suggest that, at a symbolic level, the idea is accepted. But there is considerably less agreement about its operational meaning" (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997, p. 66).

For the past ten years, the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) has been gathering data and researching policy issues related to the assessment of students with disabilities. Areas of recent and current research include accommodations and modifications to permit maximum inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular assessments, and the development of alternate assessments for those students who cannot be accommodated (Ysseldyke, Olsen & Thurlow, 1997; Ysseldyke, & Olsen, 1997). This research was a major component in the evolution of federal policy related to the participation of students with disabilities in assessments.

Current federal policy in this area is clearly indicated in the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its implementing regulations released on March 12, 1999. States are now required to include children with disabilities in state and district-wide assessment programs with appropriate accommodations and modifications, if necessary, and to develop alternate assessments for students who cannot be otherwise accommodated (34 CFR 300.138). Considerable controversy has arisen about the validity and appropriate use of accommodations, and research on this topic is in an early stage (Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). The concept of an alternate assessment for those students with disabilities who cannot be accommodated in regular assessments is the newest aspect of assessment, and states are struggling to meet the statutory requirement to have this component in place by the July 2000 deadline.

At the time this document is being written, only one state—Kentucky—has met the goal of full participation in its accountability system including the use of an alternate assessment (Kearns, Kleinert, & Kennedy, 1999). Extensive research efforts are in process, including many assessment projects funded by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The evolving and sometimes conflicting nature of the preliminary findings indicate the need for continued and expanded investment in this area (Tindal & Fuchs, 1999). In recognition of the emerging nature of knowledge in this area, IDEA regulations do not specify implementation details. As stated in the discussion section of the regulations: "Only minimum requirements are included in these regulations for how public agencies provide for the participation of children with

disabilities in state and district-wide assessments. The Department will be working with state and local education personnel, parents, experts in the field of assessment and others interested in this area of assessment to identify best practice that could serve as the basis for a technical assistance document" (Federal Register, March 12,1999, p. 12564).

Consequences

Standards and assessments have at best a minimal chance of influencing achievement when there are no significant consequences involved, but there is much controversy over what the repercussions for poor performance should be. Current state policies on this aspect of accountability systems are summarized in detail in *Education Week's* Quality Counts'99: Rewarding Results, Punishing Failure. The overview (pp. 5-9) highlights the following:

- 48 states now test their students and 36 publish annual report cards on specific schools;
- 19 states have sanctions for chronically failing schools;
- 14 states provide monetary rewards for schools; and,
- 19 states rate their schools on performance, but seven consider only test scores, while the rest calculate in other factors such as attendance or graduation rates.

Some attention is paid to aspects of accountability other than assessments, such as the allocation of resources within districts and dilemmas of improving teacher quality, but the bulk of the professional and popular press coverage remains focused on test scores.

Some schools and districts have attached *high-stakes* consequences to assessments for student promotion and/or graduation, and the recent spotlight on "eliminating social promotion" has resurrected long-standing disagreements over retention in grade. In a review of the extensive research that has been done on this issue, Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) depict grade retention as "a crude concept that derives from the assembly line model of schooling," and that "ignores questions of whether the child was appropriately taught the first time, whether doing the same thing over again is likely to be successful, and whether the educational environment itself, rather than the child, is lacking" (p.191). These and other factors also come into play in the use of high-stakes assessments for students with disabilities (Langenfeld et al., 1997).

The use of rewards for teachers and schools is equally controversial. The Kentucky accountability program is the most extensive implementation of such a system. Originally, schools that exceeded their target received a pool of reward funds could be distributed by teachers for any purpose, including salary bonuses (Kelley, 1998), but recent legislated revisions to the program put limits on the use of incentive awards (Quality Counts, 1999, p. 147). In her study of the reward system in Kentucky, Kelley (1998) concludes that teachers did not report that financial reward was a motivator. Rather, they cited: fear of negative publicity, a desire for public positive recognition, the intrinsic reward of seeing students achieve, and, for a small number, fear of a loss of professional autonomy as outcomes that provided meaningful incentives. The design of a reward program requires careful planning and implementation. In series of workshops to assist those setting up performance award programs, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) advises careful attention to a variety of issues including the selection of measurable aspects of

performance, how to make the measurement fair for teachers given different student populations, the amount of improvement required for an award, the levels and types of awards, and how schools will be "enabled" to help them produce expected improvements.

States have adopted a variety of measures to be imposed on schools and districts as an accountability tool including probation, warnings, loss of accreditation, funding gains or losses, regulatory waivers, and dissolution (Erickson, 1998). The most dramatic consequence that has been adopted by states for failing schools or districts is complete or partial takeover, reconstitution, or closure. Two policy briefs by the Education Commission of the States (Anderson & Lewis, 1997; Ziebarth, 1998) examined state policies in this area and report that, in 1998, a total of 22 states had "academic bankruptcy" laws in place. Ziebarth concluded that, with many other aspects of accountability, the lack of strong research evidence precludes any determination of the effectiveness of this "solution" (p. 4). However, coverage of this issue in the popular press suggests very limited results from this sanction. In a series on the ten-year anniversary of New Jersey's takeover of the Jersey City district, the New York Times concluded that, while the strategy has had some positive impact, there has been no dramatic turnaround (Newman, 1999). Ginsberg and Berry (1998, p. 49) came to a similar conclusion about this strategy: "After a decade of reform, the historically-low performing schools and districts tended to remain the poorest achievers in their respective districts and states."

Capacity building

Rather than applying only those consequences that are perceived as strictly punitive, some states are investing in a proactive approach to assist the development of internal capacity within poorly performing schools and districts. For example, North Carolina provides State Assistance Teams composed of teachers, administrators and college professors that receive extensive training prior to entering a troubled district (MCREL, 1998, p. 4). A team works daily onsite for a year-long assignment using an action plan jointly developed by the team and school personnel. The teams meet quarterly and ongoing coordination is provided by the state department of education. The North Carolina approach illustrates the conclusion of Newman, King, and Rigdon (1997) that external accountability alone will not ensure that a school faculty will have adequate organizational capacity to improve, and that highly prescriptive consequences mandated by external authorities deny school staff the necessary ownership of the change process to make it effective. Similarly, Cibulka and Derlin (1998) describe the unique circumstances that prevail in urban districts that underscore the importance of capacity building at the local level.

Massell (1998) describes a more extensive array of capacity-building strategies that states can use to move from their traditional regulatory and compliance roles to one of technical assistance through regional service centers and external organizations. Again, building local capacity is featured, with emphasis on locating assistance closer to schools and supporting professional networks, curriculum guidance, and quality standards for professional development. As the MCREL report (1998, p. 7) observes, "States still have many lessons to learn about building capacity and changing instructional practice."

Choice and Market Issues

Another feature of the current educational reform movement that has spawned national standards developed by professional organizations in the academic disciplines, is the loosening of federal and state controls to allow for district and school autonomy (Paris, 1998). Although often discussed in the literature only in terms of consequences in an accountability system, rapidly growing choice options and the intrusion of market forces into public schools are a direct result of the current reform movement. Many states and districts are experimenting with various alternative forms of school governance such as school-based management, contract management of public schools, public charter schools, and vouchers. Public opinion polls over the past few years have shown rising support for increased choice, although the majority do not favor the use of public tuition for placement in private schools (Rose & Gallup, 1998).

As of spring 1999, there are 34 states plus the District of Columbia with laws permitting the establishment of *charter schools*, and over 1,200 such schools have been opened. Definitions of this new entity of the public education system usually contain reference to their commitment to increased accountability in exchange for increased autonomy. Charter schools in some states are conversions from previously private schools, and some involve private educational management organizations in their design or operation. All charters are issued for a fixed time period according to state law. Much attention is currently being paid to measuring accountability in these schools as part of the process of renewing their charters (Manno, 1999).

Contract management is a concept proposed by Paul Hill (Hill, Pierce and Guthrie, 1997) that involves a radical revision of the role of school boards from the direct operation of schools to the management of contracts with individuals or groups that would operate one or more schools in a district using public funds, following board policy, and monitored by the board. Hill describes contracting out as the form of privatization that retains the strongest government influence on service providers, while freeing schools from "micro-management by political bodies" (p. 53).

Many other varieties of choice programs have been established in recent years such as opportunities for parents to select placements for their children from among schools within a public system. However, research on aspects of the choice movement is more often produced by individuals and organizations with ideological advocacy agendas than any other aspect of educational reform. As Powers and Cookson (1999) observe, few analyses of choice programs have systematically explained how much, if at all, choice programs can be linked to broader processes of school reform. After reviewing the studies that do exist and stressing the significant gaps in our knowledge about the effects of these governance issues, they conclude that "separating fact from fiction and statistical findings from the extravagant claims of market theorists will not be easy" (p. 121).

A more extensive experience with choice has occurred in the United Kingdom where local management of schools was introduced in the Education Act of 1988 (Ouston, Fidler and Earley, 1998). Funding was allocated to schools based on the number of students they admitted, and the law added a national curriculum with national tests at ages 7, 11 and 14 in addition to the existing

national examinations at age 16. Parental choice through open enrollment was also introduced, and schools were permitted to leave their local district control if parents wished them to become grant maintained, a status similar to charter schools in the United States.

Accreditations, Monitoring, and Inspections

Accountability procedures such as accreditation, monitoring or inspection systems until recently focused solely on input factors. Traditional educational accreditation programs in the United States evolved from the work of Flexner in the early 1900s to upgrade the quality in America's medical schools (Russell & Christensen, 1999). Until recently, quality was judged on the basis of quantitative factors such as the number of library books. Recent revisions have re-focused attention on student achievement and a more outcomes-oriented approach. However, this revised emphasis is a more time-consuming and complex process—Russell and Christensen outline 24 steps within the outcomes accreditation process (p. 3), and discuss threats that exist to the validity at various points.

An accountability system in the form of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (now known as The Office for Standards in Education or OFSTED) has been in place in England for over 150 years (Bolton, 1998). The most recent approach was defined by a law passed in 1992 that introduced systematic inspections of all schools in England and Wales on a four-year cycle based on the goal of "Improvement through Inspection" (Earley, 1997). Team visits started in secondary schools in 1993 and in primary and special schools the following year.[1] However, in reporting the results of a case study, Radnor, et al. (1998) conclude that the meaning and practice of accountability have become obscured and incoherent as a result of the new variations in governance and changing relationships. Similar concerns are expressed in a report on a research project that concluded there was little effect on classroom practices from the changes related to the inspection system in England (Webb, et al. 1998). It is interesting to note that one of the documents available on the OFSTED website is a set of proposals being considered in spring 1999 for significant changes in the inspection system.

Given the primacy of state control of education in the United States, most accountability activities emanate from the state level. The only parallel to the U. K.'s national inspection system is the monitoring of programs that receive federal funding such as the compliance monitoring system OSEP has developed for reviewing special education in states. State "inspections" are becoming part of the newer accountability approaches in some states (Fuhrman, 1999). For example, the Kansas program uses a five-year cycle based on a continuous improvement strategy with a visiting team involved in both the development of improvement plans at the start of the cycle, and the inspection visit at the end. Other states have adopted variations of the accreditation and inspection approaches.

[1]Detailed information about OFSTED and a comprehensive database of inspection reports are available online at www.ofsted.gov.uk/indexa.htm. A thorough set of procedures have also been developed for inspecting schools for students with disabilities (OFSTED, 1995).

AN EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL

Educational Accountability as a System

In their work on reform in urban settings, Forsyth and Tallerico (1998) provide an enlightening metaphor for the complex and systemic nature of educational accountability by likening it to gardening. Gardeners are not solely preoccupied with the current harvest. They also apply all kinds of knowledge and skill with constant adjustments to enrich the environment of the garden and protect it from harm. Gardeners know that the harvest at hand is important, but that care for soil conditions, monitoring surrounding vegetation, and adequate water and fertilizer are just as important to provide optimum conditions for future harvests. The authors note that, just as a gardener will not be successful by focusing only on the harvest, a focus on outcomes alone—so prevalent in accountability programs—will not adequately serve the complexities of education.

Fuhrman (1999) also differentiates newer accountability approaches from more traditional ones by citing their characteristics. In addition to a focus on student performance, state accountability systems are focusing on continuous improvement strategies, new forms of inspection, reporting and consequences, and a recognition of internal and external accountability. Massell, Kirst and Hoppe (1997) observe that standards-based reform has made impressive gains in recent years, but very little progress in addressing equity issues. They attribute this poor result to the lack of involvement of special educators in the developing of new accountability policies. Similarly, Wong and Moulton (1998) comment that student outcomes may serve as a useful indicator, but accountability programs often fail to specify the critical link between a wide array of institutional actors and school performance. They expand the scope of those to be held accountable to everyone who has a role that affects the schools starting with the state governor.

The work of these and many of the other researchers who were included in this review of the literature refer often to the systemic nature of accountability. Yet, this summary of the content of that literature indicates that currently there is no real 'systemic' approach to the topic. Dictionary definitions of the word 'system' refer to interrelated parts that make up a unified whole. However, there is no evidence of an organizing framework that could bring a unifying element to the complex array of activities related to educational accountability. References to systemic issues or recommendations to involve an entire school system in an accountability project are not uncommon, and the description of efforts to establish accountability are most often fragmented or limited in focus, leaving out essential elements of the concept. There is a need for a comprehensive model of accountability that *NASDSE's Vision for Balanced Accountability*, described in the next section, can fulfill.

NASDSE Accountability Model

In 1995, the NASDSE Board of Directors held a seminar to examine issues of accountability focusing on the need to consolidate special and general education within the same accountability structure. Proposals for reauthorization of the federal special education statute were pending at the time, and the overarching thrust was to improve the educational outcomes for students with

disabilities through re-integration of special education into the general school system structure. Newly proposed requirements for access to the general education curriculum and inclusion in state and district assessments for all students with disabilities accentuated the need to review educational accountability from a broader perspective.

The conceptual framework used to devise the NASDSE model of accountability is known as the *social process triangle* (Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1971). This model involves viewing a social process in terms of three fundamental components such as its economic or foundational aspect; its political or organizational aspect; and its cultural or meaning-giving aspect. In an ideal state, each of the three poles of the triangle performs its unique function to provide balance. Often in reality, however, a relative imbalance prevails with one pole often assuming dominance and functioning as a kind of "tyrant," a second pole supporting the dominant one in an "ally" relationship, and the third pole manifesting a "collapsed" state.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the literature is replete with various definitions of the term accountability. Rather than focus on the term itself, the framers of the NASDSE Balanced Model of Accountability chose to focus on *an accountable education system* defined as "one which ensures that all children, including those with disabilities, benefit from their educational experience through equal access, high standards, and high expectations" (NASDSE, 1995).

With this definition as the core, the NASDSE Model depicts educational accountability as composed of the following three components:

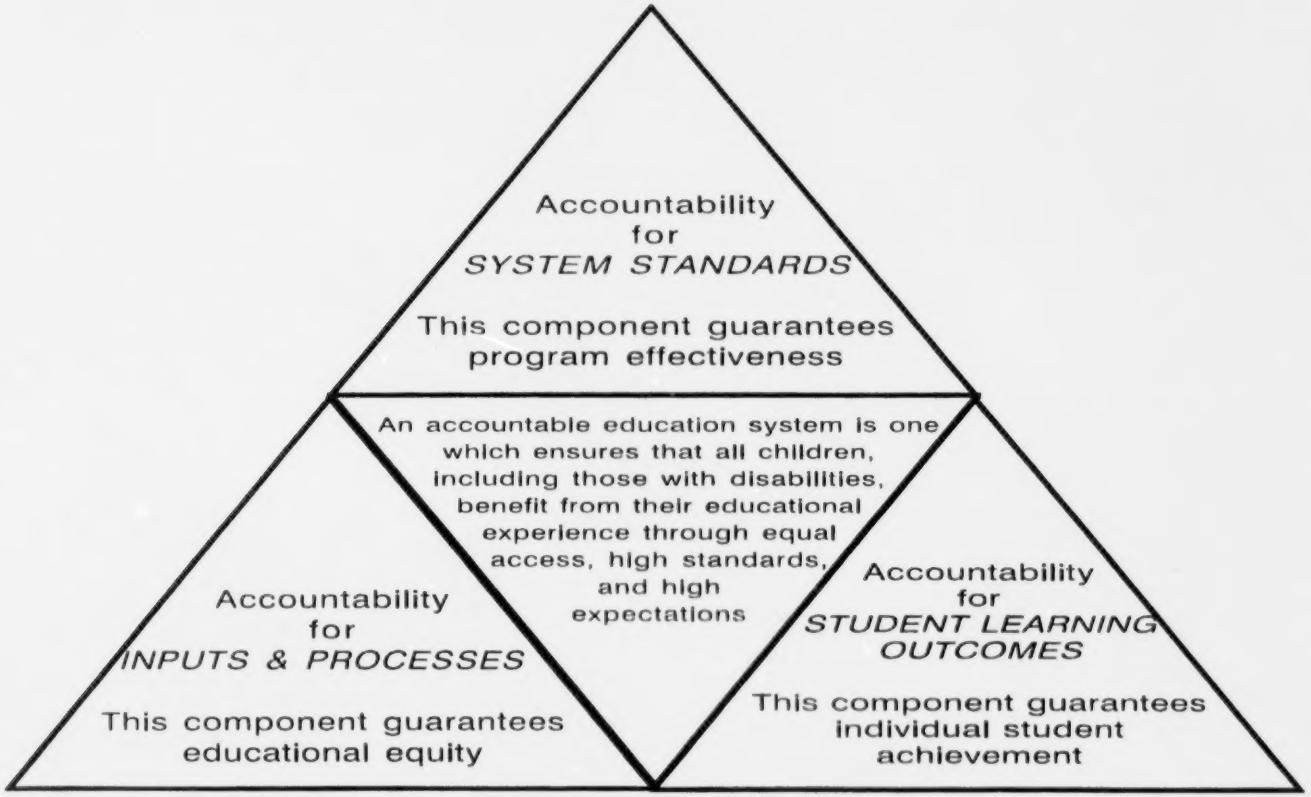
- *Accountability for Inputs and Processes*;
- *Accountability for System Standards*; and,
- *Accountability for Individual Student Learning.*

The relational dynamics of the model among and between these three components of educational accountability provide the potential for a balanced system when each component functions in an effective or robust manner, and there is no expansion of any one of the elements of accountability to the impairment of any other element.

Although the model was originally developed by state administrators seeking a structure for use at the state level, it has become clear through subsequent development work (summarized below) that the model is generic, that is, it is applicable to an educational accountability system at the national, district or school level as well as the originally targeted state level. The three components encompass every aspect of accountability in education and the concept of dynamic balance that is the essence of the model. This dynamic balance is missing from current dialogue that too often equates accountability with test scores or with monitoring of processes to the exclusion of other constituents of the total construct.

A graphic depiction of the NASDSE Model appears on the next page.

NASDSE BALANCED SYSTEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY



Model Development

With the assistance of The Johnson Foundation, NASDSE designed a series of conferences that brought together a broad-based group of stakeholders at the Foundation's Wingspread Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The first three conferences each concentrated on an individual component of the triangular model, and the fourth, held in October 1999, focused on the integration of the components and the concept of dynamic balance through the interrelationship of all parts of the model. The following is a brief summary of the outcomes of the first three Wingspread Conferences.

Wingspread I

The first Wingspread Conference in 1996 concentrated on the individualized educational program (IEP) that is required for all students found eligible for special education under IDEA. The term 'IEP' is used with two different meanings: the IEP as a *process* used by a multidisciplinary team, including the parent, to review the student's evaluation and plan an appropriate program, and the IEP *document* that results from the meeting of the team that describes the student's strengths and weaknesses, the services to be delivered, and the student's placement and goals for the next year. Conference deliberations included both of these meanings. A background paper, prepared as a Project FORUM activity, traced the history and development of the IEP over the previous twenty years, and posed questions for conference participants to consider in discussing future directions for the IEP (Schrag, 1996).

After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the IEP process and the IEP document, conference participants developed a set of recommendations that would enhance the value of the IEP for instruction and accountability. A ranking of the recommendations resulted in a high potential for positive effects if the recommendations were implemented, but a belief that there was little likelihood that the implementation would take place. In discussing this contradiction, participants agreed that there were certain overriding barriers, and that substantial modification of existing practices was necessary before successful change could be expected. Identified problem areas included:

- Current special education accountability that is limited to regulation monitoring and ties funding to compliance with paper documentation and procedural matters;
- Low levels of trust between families and schools;
- Lack of trust in the capacity of all levels of government to deliver the necessary support for such changes;
- The evolution of the IEP into a legal document; and,
- The "cloud of litigation" that overshadows all of special education (NASDSE, 1996).

With the support of Judy Heumann, Assistant Secretary of the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, who was a participant in these discussions, follow-up design team activities were held that resulted in the publication of a training program, *IEP Connections* (Kukic & Schrag, 1998).

With the IEP as the subject of this first conference, participants did not have the opportunity to discuss the many other activities that are part of accountability for individual learning. The inadvertent result was an initial exclusive focus on special education that was broadened during subsequent work on the other two components of the model. Further work will be done in the upcoming final conference to expand on the contents of the student learning outcomes domain.

Wingspread II

The second Wingspread Conference focused on the system standards component of the NASDSE model. Discussion of this component was framed around the three phases of an accountability system that were described in the conference background paper as follows:

- *Design/Development* - articulating system philosophy and mission, determining the purpose of the accountability system, engaging public support, developing standards, selecting assessment procedures, adopting rewards and sanctions, reporting on progress, and analyzing fiscal implications.
- *Implementation* - management, ongoing oversight, staff development, alignment of assessment and curriculum, assessment administration issues, and examination of results; and,
- *Evaluation* - regular review to ascertain the impact, efficacy, and problems in the accountability system and to plan appropriate revisions.

The outcomes of this conference were incorporated into a matrix of guiding principles for an inclusive accountability system. The three phases were used as an organizing frame, and the principles were clustered into four categories: *foundation*—the fundamental elements that form the basis of the system; *structure*—the interrelated factors that provide organization for the system; *resources/personnel*—the means necessary to start and maintain the system; and, *use/effects*— the elements that foster appropriate fulfillment of system purposes (NASDSE, 1997).

Wingspread III

The inputs and processes section of the NASDSE model was the focus of the third conference held in 1998. A Project FORUM review of the literature, that provided an initial list of input factors for the discussion, was used as the background paper (Schrag, 1998). The emphasis was on those input/process factors for which there is some evidence of impact on student learning. The assigned task for participants was to develop a set of tasks and guidelines that could be used to assist in the development, adoption, and implementation of the inputs and processes component. Two formal presentations on concepts closely associated with inputs and processes were made prior to work on the guidelines—one on accreditation by John Heskett, Assistant Commissioner of the Missouri Department to Education, and the other on monitoring by Ruth Ryder, Director of OSEP's Division of Monitoring and State Improvement Planning.

Conference discussions emphasized the need to direct energy toward changing those factors that are under the control of the school, and recognizing that the uncontrollable parts of the system, such as demographics of the student population, should not be used as excuses for inadequate student

learning. It was also noted that more emphasis must be placed on the allocation and use of input factors than on the mere presence or amounts of resources. The final list of tasks and guidelines was divided into three phases: *selection* of input and process factors; *measuring and reporting*; and, *use and evaluation* (NASDSE, 1998). The steps in each phase were identified, and strategies for each step were listed.

Wingspread IV

This synthesis of the literature on educational accountability was used by participants at the final Wingspread conference in October 1999 to coordinate and deepen development of the NASDSE model. The major goal of this conference is to identify strategies for maintaining balance in an accountability system. Specific planned tasks for participants are:

- To review all three individual components of the NASDSE Model and expand on them in view of new developments in education reform (Particular emphasis will be placed on reviewing new knowledge about the three components and gaps in the treatment of each one in previous Wingspread conference work.);
- To integrate the individual components to form a dynamic and cohesive model (articulation of the primary functional interrelationships);
- To identify key practices or structures that serve as indicators of balance or imbalance in the education system (establishing indicators that reflect the degree to which the primary functions are being performed); and,
- To determine factors that will provide practitioners with a conceptual and practical guide to assessing and strengthening their system accountability.

One outcome of this conference is a summary of the proceedings produced by NASDSE. Participants at the conference also discussed plans for a book to be written about the NASDSE model and its implementation.

CONCLUSION

This synthesis of the literature on educational accountability reveals that there is much unfinished business in the educational reform movement and gaps in the research that need to be filled to assist in guiding that movement. Forsyth and Tallerico (1998) recommend research methods that are multiple and longitudinal, and that would allow comparison of improvement strategies. They also advocate more study of a systemic approach to accountability that would emphasize local school capacity building, rather than the more common focus on test data and sanctions. In a similar vein, MacPherson (1998) calls for cooperative research that links community to school and state to help identify effective accountability practices.

New knowledge, especially in the area of assessments and governance, is evolving rapidly. At the same time, many aspects of research are changing. For example, Johnson (1999) stresses that the traditional attitude toward research considered it to be nonideological, but rather emerging models increasingly emphasize the political nature of knowledge generation and use. He observes that

simplistic assumptions about clear facts generated by research and used for decision making are naive, and adds that the way in which policy makers use research can be as important as the findings themselves.

With education as a major focus in political and media circles, accountability reporting by schools, districts, and states is receiving expanded public attention. It is increasingly problematic that media coverage tends to focus almost exclusively on test results. Communicating of educational results needs to be expressed in a broader, more thorough manner to include all aspects of the system in order to cover the full range of accountability. This goal can be accomplished only if the accountability system includes all the relevant components of an comprehensive approach from inputs and processes, through individual student learning, to overall system results. Schools, systems and states need to attend to all of these elements as well as the interrelationship among them to be able to respond to the demands for educational accountability that characterize the current reform movement in American education.

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